

James Cahill's 4 Art Highlights of 2011

by James Cahill

Urethra Postcard Pictures

Gilbert & George

White Cube, Mason's Yard

25-26 Mason's Yard, London SW1Y 6BU,
United Kingdom

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The mistletoe may still be up and the mulled wine chilling in the pot, however the holidays are not over since the new year is just around the corner. What may be more fitting then: a recap of the year with **James Cahill's pick of London's 4 Art Highlights of 2011.**

**1. Gilbert and George: Urethra Postcard Art at White Cube**

The Urethra Postcard Art of Gilbert & George was a hilarious and duly provocative reprisal of the duo's 'postcard art'. In 155 framed collages, multiple copies of a postcard were arranged in the same rectangular scheme with a single card in the middle. This diagrammatic 'urethra' symbol was used as a kind of sexual crest or cartouche by the theosophist CW Leadbetter. In other words, it represents a stamp of libertarianism at the same time as a confabulated nonsense, a piss-take, and so reflects the contrived grandeur of heraldic crests everywhere. The cards themselves were alternately nostalgic and salacious documents of London culture over the last thirty years, ranging from tourist tat (all featuring the Union Jack) to gay nightclub flyers and telephone box bills of fare which offered services to cater for every fetish. The show offered a kind of index or 'legend' to Gilbert & George's corpus. At the same time, it was an evocative memorial to London's public and private faces in the decades before the Internet.



Gilbert & George, *Urethra Postcard Art*, 2011, Courtesy White Cube.

2. Ged Quinn at Stephen Friedman Gallery

Ged Quinn's exhibition of giant landscape paintings (offset by a couple of smaller portraits) seemed, at first glance, an homage to the verdant vistas and milky light of Claude. But a host of other bizarre references infiltrated each picture – in *Flaschenpost* (2010), two boys huddled in the foreground on top of something resembling a Modernist architectural model. One's head was shrouded in a Sudarium-style cloth which was also a German newspaper, while the other (donning a red-starred hat) held a sacrificial lamb in his lap. Each work suggested a whimsical exercise in pictorial allusion. But in fact, Quinn's works teased apart and stretched to its limits the very idea of allusion, as their disjointed images stacked up ad absurdum within Claude's serene superstructure. Virtuoso as well as self-questioning, the works dealt an eloquent riposte to the ongoing 'death of painting' arguments which now seem as dated as the 'death of the novel' theses of the 70s and 80s.

3. Twombly and Poussin: Arcadian Painters at Dulwich Picture Gallery

Twombly and Poussin: Arcadian Painters at Dulwich Picture Gallery, curated by Nicholas Cullinan proposed highly imaginative juxtapositions. The august works of the seventeenth-century neoclassical master were interspersed with the blotched, scribbled and stippled paintings and drawings of the twentieth-century 'neo-classicist' Cy Twombly. The display steered clear of reductive parallelism, and if anything, it exposed the great gulf between the two artists' temperaments (compare Poussin's stately conclave of gods on Parnassus with Twombly's orgiastic repository of phalluses and white clusters in his evocation of the subject). The exhibition was an affirmation of the malleability of myth and its relevance to artists across epochs. A powerful touch was the sculpture of a black rose installed within the dim circular mausoleum of the gallery's founders. It struck a presciently elegiac note (in view of Twombly's death a week after the show opened), calling to mind the classical trope of beautiful youths dying and becoming flowers.



Cy Twombly, *Quattro Stagioni: Inverno*, 1993-5, Acrylic, oil and pencil on canvas, 3229 x 2300 x 67mm, Tate: Purchased with assistance from the American Fund for the Tate Gallery and Tate Members 2002, Image credit: ©Tate, London, 2010

4. Margarita Gluzberg's Avenue des Gobelins at Paradise Row

Margarita Gluzberg's *Avenue des Gobelins* at Paradise Row was a stylish homage to the photography of Eugène Atget, whose iconic shots of the streets and shop fronts of Paris strongly influenced the Surrealists. Gluzberg's imagery (all shot on 35mm film and displayed as slide projections, a looping video and platinum prints) formed a beguiling mesh of department store windows, mannequins, handbags, escalators, and advertisements. Her film had been run through the camera multiple times to create these dreamlike composites. In one photograph, cast-off garments at Primark merged surreally with a siren-like model's face. The slide works were projected onto sheets of paper smothered with graphite, causing them to shimmer spectrally. This was a powerful and nuanced allegory of desire (and the impossibility of its fulfillment) – at once nostalgic and timely.

-- James Cahill